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THE  
PARENTS' REVIEW

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE  
OF HOME-TRAINING AND CULTURE.

"Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life."

RUSKIN IN RELATION TO DANTE.

BY JULIA FIRTH.

II.

DANTE usually looked upon forests and woods as savage and terrible, but in his ideal landscape,\* that of the terrestrial paradise, "we find ourselves entering a forest, and even a thick forest"; his first aim being to show evidence of the perfect liberty of the purified and noble human being, and "of the purity and sinlessness of the new nature converting pathless ways into happy ones. So that all those fences and formalisms which were needed for him in imperfection, are removed in the paradise."

It was into this wood that Dante entered; his path

"Was bounded by a rill which to the left,  
With little rippling waters bent the grass,  
That issued from its brink."

His wondering eyes pass onward to survey

"The tender May-bloom, flushed through many a hue,  
In prodigal variety."

He saw the lady all alone on the opposite side of the little

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\* "Modern Painters," iii. 219.



stream of Lethe, singing and "culling flower from flower"; Ruskin explains her pure gladness as her delight in the works of God, and shows how the symbolic character of this lady, the Countess Matilda, was that of the glorified active powers of man; she was Dante's guide in the terrestrial paradise, as Beatrice, the type of the contemplative powers of man, became his guide in the Paradise. The vision of Rachel and Leah had represented "the active life which has only the service of man for its end." Leah decorated herself with flowers, Rachel contemplated herself. But in heaven's vestibule the delight was in God's work; as in heaven itself, Beatrice, after looking down for a moment, turns again "towards the eternal fountain."

Ruskin again and again defines true art (in similar words, much goodness and happiness also) as "the expression of man's delight in God's work. Wisdom (he says) measures all worthiness by pure felicity."\*

In this connection one is reminded of a beautiful passage in "Lorna Doone":

"By the side of the stream she was coming to me, even among the primroses, as if she loved them all, and every flower looked the brighter as her eyes were on them. I could not see what her face was, my heart so awoke and trembled, only that her hair was flowing from a wreath of white violets, and the grace of her coming was like the appearance of the first wind-flower. The pale gleam over the western cliffs threw a shadow of light behind her as if the sun were lingering. . . . The tremulous thrill of her song was hanging on her open lips, and she glanced around as if the birds were accustomed to make answer." Then, after she had seen the youth: "She had kept her eyes upon me, large eyes of a softness, a brightness, and a dignity which made me feel as if I must for ever love and yet for ever know myself unworthy. Unless themselves should fill with love, which is the spring of all things."

Perhaps many readers have in this lovely scene (ch. xvi.) felt themselves in the atmosphere of Dante's terrestrial paradise: the stream, the flowers, the singing, the delight, all are there. Love's purifying power reveals Nature to the girl; she is made glad by the works of God; the boy is purified and ennobled by

\* "Eagle's Nest," 21.

his love for her. Surely this is a glorified form of "the old, old story," a bit of pure gold without alloy.

To pass on to mental gloom, it is remarkable that Dante places the sighing multitude, the idly melancholy, in the fifth circle of Inferno; the wrathful are a miry tribe in the mud of the Stygian lake; the gloomy cause the bubbles on its surface by their sighs:

"Fixed in the slime they say: 'Sad once were we  
In the sweet air made glad some by the sun  
[Nell' aer dolce che dal sol s'allegro],  
Carrying a foul and lazy mist within:  
Now in these murky settlements are we sad.  
Such dolorous strains they gurgle in their throats,  
But word distinct can utter none."

Ruskin's insistence on gladness cannot escape the attention of any careful reader of his books; he exhorts working men to educate themselves and their children so as to make them capable of honesty and capable of delight, and to rescue themselves from iniquity and agony; he urges girls to try always not to mortify but to vivify themselves; he declares that men help each other by their joy, not by their sorrow; he deplors that "half the world will not see the terrible and sad truths which the universe is full of, but surrounds itself with little clouds of sulky and unnecessary fog for its own special breathing."

Dante's protest against gloom of heart and unnecessary sadness is connected with his keen and sensitive love of sunshine. With this protest we may also connect his symbolic colour system, which was that of the Middle Ages, colour being "associated with life in the human body, with light in the sky, with purity and hardness in the earth—death, night, and pollution of all kinds being colourless. Love is so red that in the midst of the fire she could hardly have been seen."

"Tanta rossa, che a pena fora dentro al foco nota."

"He is of all poets the most subtle in his sense of every kind of effect of light," writes Ruskin, who thus refers to his own sympathetic feeling: "I am not a poet, nor in any articulate manner could I the least explain to you what a deep element of life for me is in the sight merely of pure sunshine on a bank of living grass." Wordsworth attributes to childhood the gladdest



perception of "splendour in the grass"; but poets have an eternal childhood, the grass never loses its splendour or the flower its glory for them; true seers see more instead of less as they advance in life; an imaginative perception, which is well-nigh impossible in childhood, supersedes its glad exultation, and, unless in failing strength, the man feels more deeply and truly than the boy.

Elsewhere Ruskin dwells on the opposing of heavenly light to earth darkness in art, and says: "Make the sky calm and luminous, and raise against it dark trees, mountains, or towers, or any other substantial and terrestrial thing in bold outline, and the mind accepts the assertion of this great and solemn truth with thankfulness." And again: "With the earlier and mightier painters of Italy, the practice is commonly to leave their distance of pure and open sky of such simplicity that it in nowise shall interfere with . . . the interest of the figures, and of such purity that, especially towards the horizon, it shall be in the highest degree expressive of the infinite space of heaven."

We see therefore in Dante and Ruskin the same keen sympathy with the brighter aspects of Nature; sunshine is dear to both, both are sensitive to it; they are at one in their healthy protest against needless gloom, and, like Spenser's knight, they do battle with Sansjoy. This persistent recognition of the gladness which is inseparable from the goodness of rightly directed human effort in a beautiful setting of well-ordered civic or country life is, however, quite consistent with deep melancholy and a bitter consciousness of personal loss and suffering. The most mightily passionate souls are, of course, the most capable of both joy and sorrow; no mean cowardice is theirs, no "great refusal" spares them blame or responsibility. Ruskin writes in 1875: "Though in my own fortune unprosperous, and in my own thoughts and labour failing, I find more and more every day that I have helped many persons unknown to me; that others in spite of my failures begin to understand me, and are ready to follow; and that a certain power is indeed already in my hands, woven widely into the threads of many human lives; which power, if I now laid down, that line (which I have always kept the murmur of in my ears, for warning, since first I read it thirty years ago),

'Che fece per viltate 'l gran rifiuto,'

would be finally and fatally true of me." And he adds in a note—"Inferno iii. 60: I fear that few modern readers of Dante understand the dreadful meaning of this hellish outer district or suburb, full of the refuse or worthless scum of humanity—such numbers that 'non haverei creduto che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta'—who are stung to bloody torture by insects, and whose blood and tears together—the best that human souls can give—are sucked up on the hell-ground by worms."

A man who writes thus is not of the number of those "che mai non fur vivi," but rather like George Herbert's "honest man":

"He that doth still, and strongly, good pursue;  
To God, his neighbour, and himself most true.

\* \* \* \*

Whom others' faults do not defeat;  
But though men fail him, yet his part doth play."

Dante's power of invective in such passages as the one beginning: "Ahi serva Italia!"

"Ah, slavish Italy! thou inn of grief;  
Vessel without a pilot in loud storm";

and again:

"Christians like these the Ethiop shall condemn";

and,

"What may the Persians say unto your kings  
When they shall see that volume in the which  
All their dispraise is written, spread to view?"

And his fine irony in his address to Florence:

"Make thyself glad, for thou hast reason now,  
Thou wealthy! thou at peace! thou wisdom-fraught;"

in "Christians and proud!" has surely its counterpart in passages in Ruskin's works, too long to quote here, in which he denounces with scathing reproach that foolish national pride which, in the face of misguided multitudes, commercial dishonesty, and pitiless luxury, rejoices in a so-called unparalleled prosperity.

Dante writes of the Emperor, "who might have healed the wounds whereof fair Italy hath died"; of the tears and mourning caused to Florence by the pride and excess engendered by



"an upstart multitude and sudden gains," he looks back regretfully to earlier times, to

"The ladies and the knights, the toils and ease  
That witch'd us into love and courtesy,  
Where now such malice reigns in recreant hearts";

to the days when Florence

"Was chaste and sober, and abode in peace;  
She had no armlets and no head-tires then,  
No purfled dames, no zone that caught the eye  
More than the person did."

When his ancestor, Cacciaguida,

"Saw Bellincion Berti walk abroad  
In leather girdle and a clasp of bone,  
And, with no artful colouring on her cheeks,  
His lady leave the glass;"

when the good dames handled the spindle, and the flax, and told "old tales of Troy and Fésole and Rome"; and Ruskin loves to conserve and to restore all that is beautiful and seemly in the manners of an earlier day, finding more that is congenial to his taste in calm and graceful simplicity than in the haste and luxury of modern life.

We have now seen that there is in Ruskin the same moral rectitude, the same keen sense of justice, the same sensitive delight in Nature and life, the same protest against gloom, the same scorn of what is base, the same love of simplicity of manners, which are some of the special characteristics of Dante.

We do not find in the grave Tuscan any of the playfulness of the Teuton. We have irony, naïveté, noble grotesqueness, sarcasm; the grovelling are to grovel still, thieves are changed into serpents, forgers are covered with leprosy, speculators are boiled in pitch, the false prophets who pretended to see too far before them have to look backwards evermore. But of what we understand by humour, surely there is no trace in Dante.

We find in Dante a noble pride and a supreme humility. He knows he has acquired honour for his "beauteous style"; he writes of the "salutation kind" of the four great poets who made him of their tribe; yet he exclaims:

"O glorious stars!  
O light, impregnate with exceeding virtue!  
To whom whate'er of genius lifteth me  
Above the vulgar, grateful I refer."

In this connection, the following passage of "Modern Painters" \* is full of interest:

"I believe the first test of a truly great man is humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power, or hesitation in speaking his opinions, but a right understanding of the relation between what *he* can do or say, and the rest of the world's sayings and doings. All great men not only know their business, but usually know that they know it; and are not only right in their main opinions, but they usually know that they are right in them; only they do not think much of themselves on that account. Arnolfo knows he can build a good dome at Florence; Albert Dürer writes calmly to one who had found fault with his work, 'It cannot be better done'; Sir Isaac Newton knows that he has worked out a problem or two that would have puzzled anybody else: only they do not expect their fellow-men, therefore, to fall down and worship them; they have a curious under-sense of powerlessness, feeling that the greatness is not *in* them, but *through* them; that they could not do or be anything else than God made them."

\* Vol. iii. 266.